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Residents urged to push conservation in plan review

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First Time Buyer's Program

By Brett McLaughlin (Contact / Staff Bio)
June 10, 2009 - 11:28 p.m. EST

SENECA — Focusing on what they referred to as "staggering and intimidating" growth projections for the Upstate over the next 20 years, environmentalist urged local residents recently to get involved in the process of updating the comprehensive plans of both Oconee and Pickens counties.

And, seeking to overcome any apprehension that might be associated with attempts to impact such an undertaking, John Tynan and Chris Starker of Upstate Forever said there are three specific measures residents can attempt to have included in the planning process.

Low impact [developments](#)

Starker said urging measures that result in low impact developments does not have to be a negative for developers. In fact, he told a recent gathering at Duke's World of [Energy](#) that these types of developments can be win-win situations.

Upstate Forever contends that low impact development does not preclude high-density development, nor does [it cost](#) more or require more maintenance. Furthermore, low impact development, the organization argues, can be undertaken in heavy soil such as exists in the Upstate.

"The biggest threat to water quality is sediment from erosion," he told forum participants.

He said not making efforts to control non-point source pollution, primarily by limiting the amount of paved surfaces, results in more flooding, higher [water treatment](#) costs and reduced water supplies. Unfortunately, he said, both Oconee and Pickens produced failing grades during a recent survey of low impact [development efforts](#).

Noting that only 19 percent of parking lots are used, he pointed out that a one-inch rainstorm over one acre of a parking lot produced 16 times more runoff that the same rain over a meadow.

Low impact development is one tool to be used to accomplish a second initiative Starker said should be encouraged in comprehensive planning:

Watershed protection

Starker said there are a variety of voluntary and non-voluntary incentives to be offered developers who agree to adopt "sensible and responsible land uses and prioritize water quality."

He touched briefly on options such as transfer of development rights; establishment of a [conservation](#) escrow into which developers would pay and then get funds back as they implement conservation measures; on-site density transfers and bonuses that could result in more green areas within developments; and tax credits for conservation practices.

Starker said grants are also available to assist with conservation efforts associated with developments but said one of the key components to protecting the watershed is to anticipate expansion.

Protecting and restoring riparian buffers

Local residents were also urged to encourage comprehensive planners to include language that supports building and restoring buffers along lakes and rivers.

"A 50-foot buffer is simply too small," Starker said. "We need bigger buffers, at least 66 feet. We need to get to that middle zone at least."

Photo
Click on photo to enlarge

Audit of Pavement Standards in Oconee County
Minimizing the Extent of Impervious Surfaces in the Upstate Region of South Carolina

Graphic courtesy of Upstate Forever

According to Upstate environmentalists, Oconee and Pickens counties both received failing grades when it came to pavement and other standards aimed at maintaining quality water standards.

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He said, again, there are means of encouraging buffers that do not have to be negatives for developers. Specifically, he pointed to the practice of buffer averaging, which allows developers to be flexible, and also to density compensation, where developers are actually allowed to recoup the lost potential created by a buffer.


Starker also urged planners to include best management practices, costs sharing and conservation agreements in their comprehensive plan updates.

"The most important thing is to get involved in the comprehensive plan process," he told the forum, urging them to attend Planning Commission meetings at which the update is being considered.

He also said plans must include implementation strategies. "Without them," he warned, "the plan goes on the shelf."

For more information on Upstate Forever and its conservation efforts, go to www.upstateforever.org.

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